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The Superhero Genre: Exhibitions Which Explore the Identities, Costumes, and Missions of the Superheroes

When the superheroes emerged in the late 1930s and early 1940s they had dual identities, sidekicks, powers and abilities, arch-villains, a costume, a moral code, and a top-secret headquarters but a lawsuit in 1940 established identity, power, and mission as the fundamental attributes of the superhero genre. According to Peter Coogan in *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, Judge Learned Hand established these three elements in a copyright and infringement lawsuit between two comic book companies. In the case of Detective Comics, Inc. v. Bruns Publications, Inc., DC Comics filed a suit which claimed that Bruns Publication's superhero Wonder Man was a duplicate of their character Superman. Judge Learned Hand agreed and stated in his ruling that Wonder Man copied Superman's dual identities, various powers, and pro-social mission. Based on this copyright lawsuit, Coogan argued that Judge Hand had unknowingly provided the definitional characteristics of a superhero.[1]

Coogan took Judge Hand's interpretation a step further by combing all of the elements of Hand's verdict to comprise his own definition. Coogan's superhero is:

> A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers-extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically expresses his [or her] biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero) [...] Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret.[2]

After reading Peter Coogan's assessment of Judge Learned Hand's verdict in *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, and comparing it to the *Superheroes: Good and Evil in American Comics*, *Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy*, and *Past the Mask: The Real Life Superhero Project* exhibitions, I concluded that these exhibitions focused on how the superhero components of dual identities, colorful costumes, and world-saving missions are being explored via museum exhibitions.

By utilizing Judge Learned Hand and Peter Coogan's definitions of a superhero, I argue that *Superheroes: Good and Evil in American Comics* (exhibited from September 15, 2006 – January 28, 2007 at The Jewish Museum in New York) focused on the Jewish creators of the superhero genre during the Golden Age of American Comics (1938–1955) instead of the identities of the superheroes they created. In addition, this exhibition revealed how these characters were, at times, a mirror image of their creators. *Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy* (exhibited from May 7 – September 1, 2008 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York) demonstrated how designers adapted the superhero garb into haute couture ensembles. The exhibition also explored how the superheroes have embodied the assertive, submissive, and unconventional nature of the fashion industry. The last exhibition

Past the Mask: The Real Life Superhero Project (timeframe and location is yet to be decided) will display how average men and women, having been inspired by superheroes, confront social ills such as homelessness in their communities.

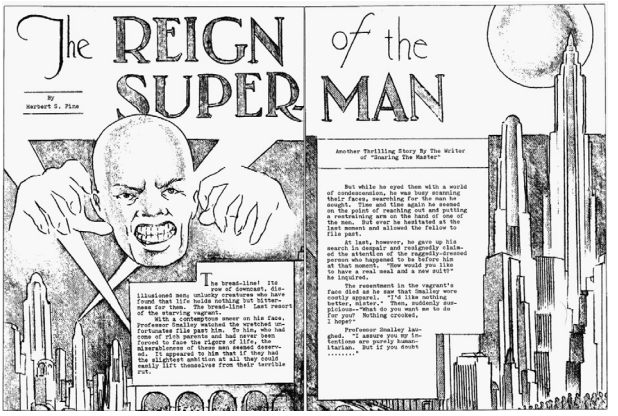
Though the prevailing thought towards superhero comics has been that they are «intrinsically commercial, mass-produced for a lowest-common-denominator audience, and therefore automatically outside notions of artistic credibility,»[3] I submit that these exhibitions lend themselves to a broader discourse of the social and artistic relevance of the superhero genre from its inception in the 1930s to modern times.

Identity

While Judge Hand categorized both soubriquet and dress as a single trait Wonder Man copied from Superman, Coogan established both identity and costume as individual components of the superhero genre. By separating costume from identity, Coogan added what he termed the «inner character connection» by way of biography (one's life history) and origin story (how one becomes a superhero) and utilized the Batman concept to illustrate his point. Bruce Wayne's early biography consisted of money, privilege, and opportunity but his origin story was forged when his parents were murdered. Devastated by the loss of his parents at a young age, he vowed that he would do all he could to eradicate crime in Gotham City. Wayne spent years training his mind and body to the height of perfection and needed a disguise and symbol that would strike fear into the hearts of criminals. When a bat flew into his room, he knew he had received his answer and thus Batman was born.[4] Bob Kane an Bill Finger created Bruce Wayne, with his unique dual identities, in the post Depression-era in the US. Their biographies, along with artists in the superhero genre were underscored in *Superheroes: Good and Evil in American Comics*.

Exhibited at the Jewish Museum in New York from September 15, 2006 – January 28, 2007, *Superheroes: Good and Evil in American Comics* was curated by Jerry Robinson (b. 1922), the designer of the character, the Joker. The exhibition highlighted the origin stories of Jerry Robinson and fourteen Jewish artists who were typically forgotten and overlooked due to the success of their creations. The exhibition featured approximately fifty works and artifacts (some of which were from Robinson's own collection) including drawings, comic books, posters, and newspaper strips.[5]

Among the artists displayed were Jerry Siegel (1914–1992) and Joe Shuster (1914–1996) who were Superman's creators. Bill Finger (1914–1974) and Bob Kane (1916–1998) who invented Batman. Joe Simon (b. 1914) and Jack «the King» Kirby (1917–1994) who were Captain America's architects and Will Eisner (1917–2005), the originator of the Spirit. Most in the comic medium also credit Will Eisner with coining the term and popularizing the graphic novel. Also on display were the works and biographies of Mort Meskin (1916–1995), Irwin Hasen (b. 1918), Fred Ray (1922–2001), Joe Kubert (b. 1926), Lou Fine (1914–1971), Mac Raboy (1914–1967), and Alex Schomburg (1905–1998) who also made artistic contributions to the superhero genre[6]. Though most of these artists claimed that Jewish matters had little to do with the creation of comic books or superheroes,[7] the Jewish Museum wanted to showcase the contributions made by these artists within the comic medium and superhero genre, during the Golden Age of Ameri-



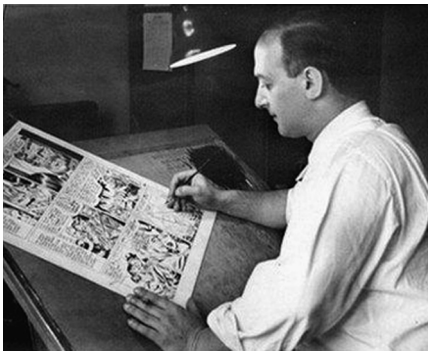
1 «The Reign of Superman» (1933) was Siegel and Shuster's first version of the character. Enhanced with mental powers, Superman was more of a menace than a hero

can Comic Books. A closer look at Siegel and Shuster's biographies revealed their history and impact on the comic industry.

Writer Siegel and cartoonist Shuster were both born to immigrant Jewish families who eventually found their way to Cleveland, Ohio. These young men met in Glenville High School in 1931 and collaborated on stories for their high school newspaper. With a passion for science fiction and comics, Siegel and Shuster wrote a story titled *The Reign of Superman* in their *Science Fiction* fanzine in 1933 which featured Superman, an insane character with telepathic abilities set on global domination (Fig. 1).[8] The young men went through several versions of Superman, but the character we know today with the ability to fly, a flashy costume, and a secret identity were established in 1934. Though Siegel and Shuster felt they had a great character, publishers were less than enthusiastic. Who would believe that an alien, with human features, would choose to use his powers to aid humanity?[9]

In 1938 DC Comics, looking for material for a new comic book, *Action Comics*, decided to use Siegel and Shuster's hero. Seizing the opportunity to get their character in print, Siegel and Shuster sold the rights of the character and the Man of Steel debuted in *Action Comics No. 1* in 1938.[10] Siegel and Shuster were introverts, often ostracized in school and unsuccessful with girls. Insecure about their appearance and aptitude, the young men read bodybuilding magazines and lost themselves in science-fiction magazines. Clark Kent represented the geeky klutz both Siegel and Shuster felt they were and Superman epitomized the man they desired to be.[11]

Superman had the strength, power, and capacity to save many, but was unable to rescue his creators from ruin. Superman was an instant success with children, especially young boys, but Siegel and Shuster's relationship with DC was marred by lawsuits. DC Comics claimed the rights to the character, refusing to compensate Siegel and Shuster for their work. When the men sued DC over the rights to the character in 1947, they were subsequently fired and their names were expunged from all Superman comics. The men struggled financially for years after leaving DC, while their comic creation became a multi-million dollar success. Siegel attempted to launch a new comic called *Funnyman* without much success and ended up working as a postal employee. With failing eyesight, Shuster was forced out of the industry. Thirty-eight years of legal battles left the Man



2 Photo of Meskin at work

3 *More Fun Comics No. 96* (1944) panel by Meskin

of Steel's creators emotionally and financially exhausted. In spite of this, the duo, with the help of Jerry Robinson in 1978, settled with Time Warner, parent company of DC Comics, and their names were restored in print and film as the creators of Superman.[12]

Through the Man of Steel, Siegel and Shuster were able – whether knowingly or unknowingly – to reinterpret the biblical story of Moses as interpreted by Rabbi Simcha Weinstein in his book *Up, Up, and Oy Vey! How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero*. Both Superman and Moses faced annihilation, both were discovered and raised in foreign cultures, and both men would later save the lives of millions.[13] Superman not only underscored Siegel and Shuster's Jewish history, but social issues that were prevalent during the Great Depression such as gang violence, government corruption, and domestic abuse. These young men, obsessed with social injustice, created an alter ego, Superman, to fight the battles that they believed they could not.[14]

Another influential artist was penciller Morton «Mort» Meskin (Fig. 2). Although he did not create a superhero and was relatively unknown by the general public, Meskin did create a minor character Sheena, Queen of the Jungle who appeared in *Jumbo Comics* in 1938. Sheena and Wonder Woman were the two sovereign heroines of the early days of comic books. While Wonder Woman has been credited with being the most recognized, iconic female superhero, Sheena was the first female adventure character and the first woman to star in her own comic book. Sheena, a striking blond, who embodied the erotic fantasies of men, ruled the animal kingdom. Meskin's success with Sheena created a bevy of jungle female phenomenon such as Tiger Girl, Princess Pantha, Tygra, and Rulah the Jungle Goddess.[15]

Meskin also developed an original way to depict the speed of a superhero. Meskin had worked on several superhero characters at DC Comics, one of them being Johnny Quick. To showcase Johnny's supersonic speed, Meskin illustrated the movement of the character from start to finish in the same panel (Fig. 3). This technique resulted in a visual representation of movement, allowing the process of a sight-to-brain reaction (a breaking up of one continuous movement).[16]

Meskin, Siegel, Shuster, Finger, Kirby, Robinson, Eisner, and others were instrumental in creating a new, innovative genre that exceeded the expectations of

its writers, artists, and publishers. In *Superheroes: Good and Evil in American Comics,* visitors were introduced to the real heroes, not dressed in spandex but armed with pen and ink.

Costume

Judge Hand noted how both Superman and Wonder Man concealed «skintight acrobatic costume[s]» beneath «ordinary clothing». According to Peter Coogan, the superhero costume with its chevron and colors became an iconoclastic image because it followed Scott McCloud's theory on amplification through simplification. The chevron, which is emblazoned on their costume, emphasized the character's codename and is a simplified declaration of who he/she is. The superhero costume eliminated the details of a character's mundane appearance, while leaving a simplified concept represented in the design of the hero's costume and colors.[17]

According to McCloud, the bright primary colors of the superhero costume were iconic due to their simplicity. Costume colors remained the same panel after panel, thus symbolizing the character in the minds of readers. McCloud illustrated his point by highlighting a boy reading a comic book with two thought balloons, each containing three horizontal blocks. Blocks blue, yellow, and gray, represented the original Batman and blocks purple and green represented the original Hulk.[18]

The simplified designs of the chevron and vibrant colors of the costume have even inspired the fashion industry. The Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy* exhibition opted not to celebrate an internationally renowned designer or significant fashion movement or trend, but chose to explore the diverse ways designers reinterpreted and adapted the components of the superhero, antihero, and villain costumes (Fig. 4).

Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy, exhibited from May 7 – September 1, 2008 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was curated by Andrew Bolton, curator of The Costume Institute, and sponsored by designer Giorgio Armani and publisher Condé Nast. Bolton observed that some of the archetypes and sartorial tropes found in superhero mythology and costume were used by fashion designers to convey certain attributes and he wanted to bring this relationship between the

4 Spider-Man, Punisher, and Catwoman were featured in *Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy*

superhero fantasy and contemporary fashion to light, through garments and his interpretation of specific «Body» themes.[19]

In sleek, white, brightly lit spaces, Superman and Spider-Man addressed the use of pictograms and ideograms used in brand recognition in what Bolton calls «The Graphic Body.» Wonder Woman denoted nationalistic garb in «The Patriotic Body» while Catwoman embodied both the aggressive and submissive nature of fashion in «The Paradoxical Body.» The Hulk evinced male potency and metamorphoses in «The Virile Body.» Other characters and themes in the exhibition included Batman and Iron Man, who represented the skewed line between man, clothing, and machine in «The Armored Body.» The Flash illustrated the way designers utilize materials in «The Aerodynamic Body» and the X-Men revealed the odd, quizzical, and eccentric nature of fashion in «The Mutant Body.» The finale characters were Ghost Rider and the Punisher whose mercenary natures resonated with designers in «The Postmodern Body.»[20]

The exhibition featured ensembles including original movie costumes, avant-garde haute couture, and high performance sportswear. Some designers featured in the exhibition included Giorgio Armani, Dolce & Gabbana, Jean Paul Gaultier, the late Alexander McQueen, Thierry Mugler, threeAsFour, Speedo, and Versace.[21] A closer look at «The Paradoxical Body» and «The Mutant Body» themes underscored the relationship between the fashionable body and superhero body as sites of seduction and as the progenitor of the idealized and tyrannical views of beauty.

Catwoman's «good girl» and «bad girl» images were a literal contradiction between being an object of male desire and fantasy and the denial of her power. Since her debut in *Batman No. 1* in 1949, this femme fatale's wardrobe either featured a dress with a plunging neckline and thigh-high apertures or a black leather catsuit that clung to her body. She is known for the latter due to the portrayals of the character by Julie Newmar in the television series *Batman* and Michelle Pfeiffer in the film *Batman Returns* (Fig. 5). Halle Berry in the film *Catwoman* wore a redesign of the costume, reinterpreted as a two-piece leather pushup bra and pants ensemble.[22]

Bolton asserted that Catwoman has become a spokesperson for female sexual empowerment and confidence. He linked her aggressive (alpha-cat) and submissive (kitten-like) nature to designers such as Thierry Mugler, Gianni Versace, and Dolce & Gabbana, who have created their own versions of catsuits, corsets, bustiers, and harness bras. These designs, according to Bolton, have achieved widespread acceptance as exotic-erotic haute couture.[23]

For decades, Superman, Wonder Woman, and the Flash have prompted countless readers to fantasize and celebrate the joys of being a superhero with their extraordinary powers and talents. However, the trials and complexities of a superhero were rarely understood. The mutant X-Men who first appeared in *The X-Men No. 1* in 1963 brought these issues to the forefront. These ‹categorical mistakes› were the result of increased radiation in the air and land, resulting in the «X» gene or «X» factor. This gene created abnormal, grotesque, and even bizarre physical characteristics and powers in these humans who were now considered to be mutants. These characteristics caused mutants to be shunned and feared by society, which caused many to view their powers as a burden.[24]

The X-Men team was spearheaded by Professor Charles Xavier, a paraplegic with telepathic abilities, who taught mutants how to control and contain their

5 Detail of Michelle Pfeiffer's Catwoman ensemble

6 (Center) Thierry Mugler's «Chimera Dress» (autumn/winter 1997–1998). Mugler's creation and the applications worn by Rebecca Romijn as Mystique in *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2008) were the focal points in «The Mutant Body». A printed backdrop by Jamie Rama and ensembles by Thierry Mugler (autumn/winter 1997–1998 and spring/summer 1997), Alexander McQueen (autumn/winter 2007–2008), and As Four (1999) were also featured

powers at his Xavier Institute for Higher Learning. The first enemy of the mutants was their own body. As teens, their bodies were erratic and eruptive, unstable and unreliable. Professor Xavier taught them how to protect themselves from their disruptive abilities against themselves and offered them a haven where fear, hatred, and persecution did not take precedence. He provided a sense of tolerance, appreciation, and acceptance.[25]

Andrew Bolton found a correlation between how the human and mutant bodies work in tandem for praise and frustration. Collections by Alexander McQueen, Thierry Mugler, and AsFour have questioned normalcy, often embracing the absurd. Thierry Mugler's «Chimera Dress» is the epitome of this bizarre or ‹mutated› body (Fig. 6). This corset dress has the multi-colored scales of a fish while the abdomen is reminiscent of an amphibian. It is also comprised of black hair suggestive of a mammal, and the crown is arranged in blue and black plumes similar to that of a bird. In the exhibition, the dress was flanked by amalgamated ensembles of feathers, leather, glass, and rubber. Thierry Mugler's «Chimera Dress», costumes from other designers as well as the superhero costumes in *Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy* all acknowledged the power and impact of clothing. Fashion, like the superhero costume, has the power to transform the body and the perception of the wearer, allowing man to go beyond mortal limitations towards infinite possibilities.[26]

Mission

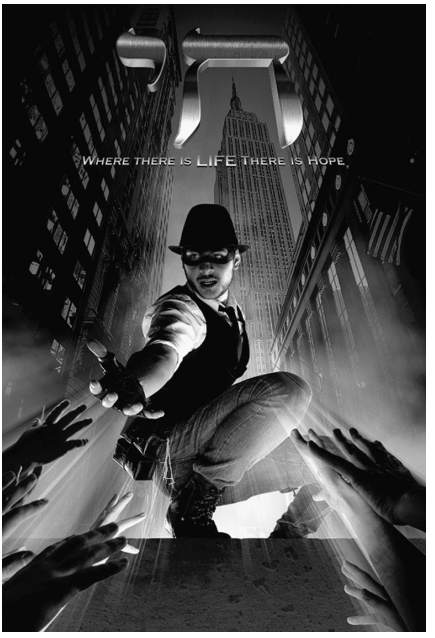
Both Superman and Wonder Man were referred to by Judge Hand as «champion[s] of the oppressed» combating «evil and justice». Coogan added to Judge Hand's definition by stating that a superhero, with his/her pro-social mission, endeavored to fight evil within societal mores and chose not to benefit or further his/her own agenda.[27] Donning flamboyant costumes, risking life, limb, and status, defenders Wonder Woman (Diana Prince), Green Lantern (Alan Scot), and Robin/

7 Real Life Superheroes group shot: Top row left to right: Life, Mutinous Angel, The Crimson Fist, Ragensi, Zetaman, Motor Mouth Center row left to right: Dark Guardian, KnightVigil, Civitron, DC's Guardian, Z, Deaths Head Moth, Zimmer Bottom row left to right: Nyx, Phantom Zero, Super Hero, Geist, Thanatos: The Dark Avenger, Master Legend, Citizen Prime

Nightwing (Dick Grayson), envisioned a world void of pain, abuse, and hopelessness, free from greed and injustice. Superhero comics have condemned social ills prevalent in US society such as domestic abuse in *Action Comics No. 1* (1938), crime in *Detective Comics No. 27* (1939), even hunger in *Heroes for Hope Starring The X-Men No. 1* (1985). These morality tales were and still are the basis of superhero stories and have induced citizens to make positive contributions in their communities, especially in the areas of hunger and homelessness.

By fashioning their own costumes and creating a superhero name, these real life heroes include Citizen Prime, Civitron, The Crimson Fist, Dark Guardian, DC's Guardian, Deaths Head Moth, Geist, KnightVigil, Life, Master Legend, Motor Mouth, Mutinous Angel, Nyx, Phantom Zero, Ragensi, Super Hero, Thanatos: The Dark Avenger, Z, Zetaman, and Zimmer. The *Past the Mask: The Real Life Superhero Project* exhibition will present a brotherhood of contemporary do-gooders (Fig. 7). Fascinated by what these real heroes do on a daily basis (e.g. feed the homeless, conduct neighborhood patrols, organize toy drives) Peter Tangen, photographer and movie poster producer for films such as *Spider-Man* and *Batman: The Dark Knight*, wanted to visually document these twenty contemporary real life personas in movie poster format.[28]

Statistics show that the NYC Department of Homeless Services can only provide temporary housing for those with the greatest need. For the homeless population, whose housing needs have not been met, the streets become their temporary/permanent home.[29] Chaim Lazaro, also known as Life, is a real life superhero. He is a minimally costumed altruist in a mask, tie-and-jacket, who makes the rounds in New York City with his backpack full of amenities (e.g. tooth-



8 Life's costume can only be described as dressy casual

9 Nyx wears a revealing black and red costume complete with striped leggings, lace stockings, garter, and mesh top

brushes, lotions, soaps, candy bars) which fill a gap left by the NYC Department of Homeless Services (Fig. 8). Life co-founded *Superheroes Anonymous* with Ben Goldman in 2007. This organization connects other Real Life Superheroes across the country and focuses on motivating others to be «Creative Altruists». *Superheroes Anonymous* is sometimes posed with a real challenge of finding people who are creative and altruistic. Encouraging them to express their generous inclinations in tangible ways is what Life sees as the ultimate mission of the organization. If he can inspire someone to help in the smallest way possible, then they can in turn do the same. Life wonders how many thousands can be helped.[30]

Nyx, another real life superhero, is one of the few females in the movement. Dressed in black, with striped leggings and a red mask, she aids the homeless in and around the New York and New Jersey areas (Fig. 9). Using car patrols, foot patrols, and even anonymous reporting to the city police department, she feels the strong need to protect the vulnerable individuals society has forgotten. «Being poor means being an illness, an accident or a paycheck away from living on the streets», she says, «and that makes the homeless easy targets on many levels». In addition to homelessness, Nyx is determined to end sexism in the real life superhero world. Even though her counterparts are altruistic, she believes they have a tendency to discount, and underestimate, the value of their female counterparts. «We can do just as good a job» she points out, «so it's important to be viewed as a person, not just some chick, or piece of meat». Nyx is a part of a growing group of other like-minded female heroes and would like to see more women join the Real Life Superhero community.[31] Hunger, violence, and intolerance are socials ills

that are rapidly increasing in the United States. Though organizations such as the American Red Cross and Adventist Community Services spearhead humanitarian efforts across the United States, *Past the Mask* revealed how much impact one individual could have on their community.

Though Judge Learned Hand did not foresee his ruling having the residual effect that it did, his verdict prompted a dialogue surrounding the components of the genre. More than just ‹penny-ante kids fare,› the superhero genre has and will continue to dialogue about self and society in contemporary times. The *Superheroes: Good and Evil in American Comics*, *Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy*, and *Past the Mask: The Real Life Superhero Project* exhibitions unearthed a genre that went beyond mere entertainment; instead these exhibiotions supported the argument that the superhero genre has made an indelible mark on US culture, society, and art.

Annotations

1 Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, Austin 2006, p. 30.
2 Ibid., p. 30.
3 Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*, Hong Kong, 2001, p. 8.
4 Coogan 2006 (footnote 1), p. 32–33.
5 Ruth Beesch, email message to the Director of Programs at The Jewish Museum, March 3, 2010.
6 «Introduction», The Jewish Museum, http://thejewishmuseum.org/exhibitions/Superheroes (accessed Novermber 7, 2010)
7 Danny Fingeroth, Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics and the Creation of the Superheroes, New York 2007, p. 24.
8 Steve Duin and Mike Richardson, *Comics: Between the Panels*, Milwaukie, 1998, p. 402.
9 Les Daniels, DC Comics: Sixty Years of the World's Favorite Comic Book Heroes, Boston, 1995), p. 20–21.
10 Ibid., p. 20–21.
11 Arie Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books*, Philadelphia, 2008, p. 9–12.
12 Duin and Richardson 1998 (footnote 7), pp. 402–403.
13 Simcha Weinstein, Up, Up, and Oy Vey! How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero, Baltimore, 2006, p. 26.
14 Kaplan 2008 (footnote 10), pp. 18–20.
15 Mike Madrid, The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines, Minneapolis 2009, p. 48.
16 Daniels 1995 (footnote 8), p. 90.
17 Coogan 2006 (footnote 1), p. 33.
18 Ibid., p. 34.
19 Shannon Price Bell, email to Senior Research Associate at The Costume Institute, February 19, 2010.
20 «Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy,» Metropolitan Museum of Art, http://www.metmuseum.org/special/superheroes/index.asp (accessed November 7,2010)
20 Giorgio Armani, sponsor's statement to Andrew Balton, *Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy*, Connecticut 2008, p. 6.
21 Bolton, *Superheroes*, p. 81.
22 Ibid., p. 85.
23 Ibid., p. 129.
24 Ibid., p. 129.
25 Giorgio Armani, sponsor's statement to Bolton 2008 (footnote19), p. 6.
26 Coogan 2006 (footnote 1), pp. 29–30.
27 «About the Project,» The Real Life Superhero Project, http://www.reallifesuperheroes.com/about (accessed September 27, 2010).
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